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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000659

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [EPET](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PINS](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: NAVY MINISTER SAYS MILITARY MUST TAKE
STRONG STAND IN THE DELTA

REF: ABUJA 236

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5 (B)
AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a March 27 meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Minister of State for Defense (Navy) Chris Agbobu discussed the recent violence in Delta State. He attributed the fighting to political power struggles between the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups, Ijaw dissatisfaction with Delta State Governor James Ibori, and Ijaw illegal oil bunkering. Agbobu claimed Ijaw "youth" used money from illegal bunkering to acquire small arms and some heavy weapons. These weapons and the overall weakness of the military and police forces in Delta State have emboldened the militants. Agbobu believed only a show of force by the military would resolve the matter. He suggested the navy hold "exercises" to demonstrate the GON's power to impose peace in the region as a way to push the Ijaws toward dialogue. END SUMMARY.

VIOLENCE IN THE DELTA

12. (C) During a March 27 meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Minister of State for Defense (Navy) Chris Agbobu discussed the causes of and possible solutions to the recent violence in Delta State. Agbobu described the causes of the violence as "two fronts." First, long-standing disputes between Ijaw and Itsekiri over the creation of new Local Government Areas (LGAs) had created friction between the two ethnic groups. The situation has been further inflamed by Delta State Governor James Ibori's support for the creation of new LGAs, favoring the Itsekiri.

13. (C) The second, and perhaps most important cause, according to Agbobu, is Ijaw oil bunkering. Agbobu claimed the Ijaw used their illicit profits to purchase weapons. Agbobu did not know the source of the weapons, but hypothesized they were being shipped into Nigeria on the very same ships that smuggled the bunkered oil out. Calling the Ijaw "terrorists," Agbobu said their attacks on the Itsekiri were designed to divert the GON's military/police task force in Delta State from the Ijaw's illegal bunkering.

14. (C) Lamenting the condition of the Navy and that Ijaw fighters were often better armed than the military, Agbobu said only a show of force by the military would deter the Ijaw's continued aggression. He suggested that the military conduct "exercises" to demonstrate that the GON could impose peace in the region if militants did not submit to government authority. Agbobu complained that Obasanjo's ultimatum to local combatants that they immediately cease all attacks and hand over those guilty of perpetrating prior violence was merely "Abuja talk." "How would the President enforce the ultimatum," Agbobu asked? Agbobu said the President should refit the Navy and supply soldiers and police with the tools they need to combat lawlessness in the Delta.

U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE AND BENUE

15. (U) Turning to U.S. security assistance, the Ambassador told Agbobu that the suspension of the IMET and FMF portions of the U.S./Nigeria Defense Cooperation program had nothing to do with the GON's position on the war in Iraq. The Ambassador explained the funds were withdrawn

because the GON had not made sufficient progress in bringing to justice those responsible for the October 2001 civilian massacre at Zaki-Biam, Benue State.

16. (C) Agbobu said U.S. assistance was the "bedrock of reforming the Ministry of Defense" and he was sorry to see the program diminished. While Agbobu accepted that the assistance suspension had nothing to do with Iraq, he was quick to criticize the U.S. position on Benue. Agbobu spoke emotionally about the killing and mutilation of the 19 soldiers that precipitated the massacre in Benue. He expressed great concern that no one seemed to care about the fate of the soldiers. Driving his point home, the Minister said, "If I were President (Zaki-Biam) would have been erased."

17. (C) Agbobu said he did not think the soldiers at Zaki-Biam acted with the sanction of higher command. He believed after seeing what happened to their comrades, the soldiers did not need orders to act. Discussing the status of the GON's investigation into the Benue incident, Agbobu said the military would overthrow President Obasanjo if he indicted any officer for his role in the massacre.

COMMENT

18. (C) Agbobu's influence in the military may not be as great as his position implies. He is a political appointee selected to insure ethnic balance in the MOD. However, his opinions on both the Delta and Benue are probably representative of opinions both in the military hierarchy and the rank-and-file. END COMMENT.
JETER